

Transforming Leader Development Through Lifelong Learning

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THE ARMY IS in the process of transforming itself. Through the Army Training and Leader Development Panel (ATLDP) assessment process, it is exploring the use of three meta-competencies: self-awareness, adaptability, and lifelong learning.¹ A meta-competency is defined as "a competency that is so powerful that it affects the person's ability to acquire other competencies."² The three meta-competencies are symbiotic and create a developmental condition that propels the learner at a faster and more complex rate than do traditional pedagogical instruction or experiential learning.

Learning is the critical activity leading to progress or growth. The challenge for organizations is to instill in individuals a desire to make learning a lifelong pursuit. Lifelong learning is defined as an individual's choice to pursue knowledge to progress beyond a known state of development or competence. Lifelong learning is a matter of psychological conditioning, not mechanical function. Without an individual's commitment to grow intellectually, the organization will fall short of its potential.

Missing from previous methods to encourage lifelong learning is the systematic use of feedback, the single most important element in the learning process. Feedback increases self-awareness and allows for dysfunctional behaviors to become unfrozen so that new, functional ones can be developed. Feedback is the basis for increasing self-awareness and empowering the individual with choice. Without feedback, learning is limited. The human condition is such that people are blind to their own behaviors and non-verbal communication. Feedback from others in the organization provides awareness of how a person is perceived by others.

The Army has always had soldiers who were motivated to learn and excel at their specialty or profession. The 1987 Sullivan study incorporated the value of this self-developmental approach.³ It broad-

ened the application of self-development to the Army at large by incorporating self-development as one of the three pillars of development. In the previous leader development model, the three-pillar format was referred to as the Parthenon because its appearance suggested a Greek temple.

The prevailing efforts in the Army today are to link lifelong learning by employing the mechanics of data transference. Army Transformation and perceived future requirements have demonstrated a need to develop in leaders a personal responsibility for learning. Indeed, the ATLDP series of studies found lifelong learning a critical requirement for future development.

Tempo-Centric Linkage and Human Development

The Army's leader development process is sequential and progressive. The key assumption is that learning is the result of experiences that build on one another. Learning or comprehending increasingly complex information depends on a sequence of prerequisite learning events. This suggests a learning environment that moves from the known to the more known with the passage of time as leaders experience duties, schooling, and self-education.⁴ Certainty, however, decreases with education. The more a person learns, the more he or she realizes they do not know, and the more he or she seeks to learn. This developmental process is counter-intuitive to the operational and fixed resource models the Army uses to develop doctrine and force structure.

The Army traditionally tries to anticipate requirements derived from an anticipated operational situation. The Army builds a force structure or resources that allow it to accomplish its anticipated mission. This is achieved by determining a reasonable estimate of time required to gather mission resources and to meet situational requirements.



A U.S. soldier tests interoperability during NATO exercise Combined Endeavor, 9 May 2003.

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All too often, this process includes predicting a predetermined set of leadership skills, competencies, and characteristics of a future leader for a future force. This is a futile exercise for two reasons. It is impossible to predict the future. We can define it in terms of what we would like it to be, but we cannot be certain what shape it will take. We can estimate the time required for producing equipment, but fielding might take longer. We can identify skills leaders should possess, but those skills might be obsolete by the time the future arrives. The best human devel-

opmental tools, knowledge, and processes are available only in the present for present-day application. To change to accommodate a prediction is guesswork.

The best method for providing quality leader development is to continue research and development of practices that encourage leaders to perform at their highest potential. A leader development process that inculcates learning as the predominant foundational factor and stresses the right types of competencies for the profession will develop leaders with a self-renewing resource: lifelong learning.

Broad-Based Competencies

The leader development process begins with the individual. Individual advancement depends on the application of the best currently available methods present. Such methods are the basis for developing future leaders because they serve as the foundation for the next level of generational growth in understanding human development. Two of the meta-competencies, self-awareness and adaptability, are universal and enduring in that they transcend fixed focal points of activity along a time continuum.

Competencies that focus leader development resources and energy on developing leaders' self-awareness and adaptability will break the current paradigm of experiential development and provide greater clarity for a developmental direction. Competencies transcend leadership levels and allow for leader development at specified levels while facilitating the Army's progressive and sequential development model. The skill sets associated with a position account for the differences of leadership levels. As an example, an armor platoon leader requires a different skill set and technical competence to lead his platoon from those an armor brigade commander needs to lead his brigade. A common technical competence, however, provides continuity from grade to grade and from leadership level to leadership level in the developmental process. This allows the Objective Force leader to focus on overall development throughout a career rather than on a short-term perspective of job-to-job, experience-to-experience.

Lifelong learning is an individual characteristic comprised of a complex amalgam of skills and abilities, the first of which is initiative. It is the individual pursuit of knowledge that leads to comprehension and task accomplishment, which allows for skill development and the creation of increased competence. Initiative becomes the quest for answers to problems not found in a field manual or school assignment. Initiative provides the motivation to accom-

plish a mission presented with unknown and uncertain challenges and difficulties. Initiative kindles the desire to develop new, missing, or undeveloped competence in new tasks. Initiative energizes the pursuit of self-awareness to hone the skills of critical thinking and decisionmaking.

Lifelong learning presents new challenges to educators and trainers because it redefines the Army's traditional belief about the role of self-development as one of the three developmental domains. The basis for self-development is the personal desire and individual choice to increase performance in some desired pursuit. Leaders face increased task complexity and uncertainty about how to perform new, complex tasks. Self-awareness brings the realization of absent or underdeveloped competencies. Former learning methods of passive learning used at institutions or of experiential learning from operational experience gives way to a new learning method of proactive learning. Although influenced by many organizational and collective factors, it is individual choice that moves the organization forward. The burden is now on the individual to identify and define needed competencies, assess his or her competence, and decide what he or she must learn to achieve success. In this way, the individual contributes optimal individual performance to the collective effort.

Finally, lifelong learning is an individual choice. The literature suggests that organizations that learn faster than can their competitors will perform best.⁵ In the U.S. Army, an organization charged to protect the Nation, choosing to learn faster than can the enemy is the only choice. The leadership challenge for today's Army is to motivate leaders to internalize the value of lifelong learning so that collectively the organization can realize its potential. Encouraging lifelong learning is not accomplished by encumbering human development with operational and resource decisions. Leader development must be built into new force design and doctrine and not tacked on as an afterthought. Only then can the leader development process provide competent leaders who possess the necessary competencies to perform successfully in any situation.

Self-Development in Lifelong Learning

First and foremost, the responsibility for development belongs to the individual. Self-development is a positive action that involves the pursuit of knowledge to establish depth of comprehension and understanding about the logic of a particular topic. As

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Soldiers role-playing as friendly military forces at a Phoenix Readiness Combat Course, Fort Dix, New Jersey, 16 January 2002.

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one of the three developmental domains, the function of self-development is to provide a means for acquiring knowledge and comprehension that would not otherwise be acquired at service schools or from operational experience. In this regard, self-development has been identified as the means to fill knowledge gaps.⁶ Filling gaps, however, is a small part of the self-development process. The act of filling knowledge gaps is reactive and provides short-term solutions to leader development, whereas the pursuit of deep comprehension, knowledge, and

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understanding is proactive and provides long-term improvement to the Army.

Technological advances are bringing information to any portal, anywhere, instantaneously. Never before has information on any topic been more accessible to more people than it is today, and the pace and amount of available information is growing exponentially. This explosion of material has created an environment highly conducive to individual learning. The availability of information at anytime, anywhere, allows lifelong learners to immerse themselves deeply into any topic at their own pace using any learning method.

Such a plethora of information can become unmanageable and overwhelming. A structured and disciplined self-development plan that includes a mentor or coach is essential. Time also becomes a critical resource. Time dedicated to self-development competes with other primary organizational responsibilities; nonetheless, self-development should occur regardless of duty assignment or status.

The three developmental domains are symbiotic. Viewed as a cycle of events in the Army developmental process, the leader enters institutional training having already experienced some training and exposure to organization accomplishment. Here, knowledge and comprehension are gained in varying degrees and brought to the operational assignment. Decisions made, conclusions drawn, and thoughts reasoned are influenced by operational experiences and by knowledge acquired from the institution. Learning from operational experiences contributes to the thoughtful development of reasoning

and critical thinking skills, thus furthering the development of critical operational skills as the cycle becomes self-perpetuating. Self-development permeates the entire process and occurs wherever and whenever the individual pursues learning.

The Role of Feedback

Feedback is the single most essential requirement for learning. Yet in the area of self-development, it is the aspect least emphasized by the Army's educational and training processes. Feedback is also neglected in the other services. Each service attaches a different emphasis to this area, although in general, the sister services do not emphasize mentorship and self-development as much as they do institutional schools and operational assignments as sources of learning.⁷

ATLDP officer and noncommissioned officer (NCO) studies highlight the lack of attention feedback has received. More important, the studies recommended changes in counseling, leader development standards, and career map pamphlets such as DA Pamphlet 600-3, *Commissioned Officer Development and Career Management*, to address the importance of feedback to the Army's developmental process.⁸

Feedback increases awareness of how others perceive one's performance against a standard. It allows the individual leader following a self-development plan to evaluate whether or not he or she is achieving desired outcomes as a result of behavioral and action choices. The awareness gained from feedback sheds light on the reasons the leader is not achieving desired outcomes. Emphasis is on the reasons for not achieving outcomes, not on the outcome itself. Feedback allows the individual to make choices otherwise unavailable without feedback. The choice is to influence events for more favorable outcomes by altering or unfreezing rote actions and behaviors or to make no changes and knowingly continue to get the same undesired outcomes. This methodology has direct application to the individual pursuit of knowledge and understanding.

The value of mentoring, coaching, and counseling cannot be overemphasized as essential parts of the feedback process. Since learning is a highly individual act, individual counseling and mentoring are required to optimize the learning potential of any given experience. The feedback provided from this type of individualized focus creates the optimal conditions for team effort in the organization setting. The individual is made aware of how his personal actions

affect the organization. The intent is to improve and change the individual and, thereby, enhance the overall performance of the team.

Lifelong Learning and the Army

What organizational environment in the Army today is not confronted with the challenges of reduced resources? Every ATLDP study cited the current operational tempo as placing significant stress on the Army as an organization and on the soldiers as individuals. Environments such as this present leaders at all levels with innumerable problems and obstacles to achieving organizational goals and accomplishing organizational missions. Answers to these challenges are not easily found and when they are, more often than not, they are highly complex and difficult to implement. The greatest percentage of organizational solutions, however, resides in the corporate body of any organization.

The Army's leadership doctrine defines leadership as an influencing process. It suggests that any member of the organization, regardless of rank or position, has the ability to influence the decisionmaking process, thus leading the organization for that particular point in time. One way to harness this energy and potential is through the creation of an organizational environment that encourages the value and eventual internalization of lifelong learning. Lifelong learning requires organizational leaders who are self-aware and committed to the pursuit of depth of knowledge in order to optimize organizational performance.

The Army's leadership has begun this process by taking the actions necessary to implement ATLDP

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recommendations. The expansion of broad competencies that transcend fixed points in time, 360-degree assessments to provide the feedback essential to quality self-development plans, and renewed emphasis on leader development counseling are evidence of the Army's commitment to improve leader development. The challenge ahead is a big one and often daunting. Instilling commitment to lifelong learning is an attempt to change a conservative culture. The alternative, however, is slower and less complete learning. Given future operational environments, that is unacceptable. **MR**

NOTES

1. The Army Training and Leader Development Panel (ATLDP) Report is an assessment of training and leader development in the Army. Its primary purpose is to inform the people part of the Army Transformation process.
2. Jon P. Briscoe and Douglas T. Hall, "Grooming and Picking Leaders Using Competency Frameworks: Do They work? An Alternative Approach and New Guidelines for Practice," *Organizational Dynamics* (Autumn 1999): 9.
3. The Leader Development Study was commissioned to "clarify the nature of leader development and its central importance to our well-being as a profession." (24 August 1987).
4. Tim Challans, Ph.D. Philosophy, Johns Hopkins University, suggests that the result is "less known" in that increased educational opportunities increase self-awareness to a point that highlights how much there is yet to learn, suggesting how far we have to go. This notion supports the concept of lifelong learning as a commitment

to a psychological state essential to the active pursuit necessary to fill an extensive void.

5. Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Currency and Doubleday, 1990).

6. The ATLDP Report: Officer Study Report to the Army (25 May 2001), OS-18; ATLDP: NCO (2 April 2002), 31.

7. Mark A. McGuire, "Senior Officers and Strategic Leader Development," *Joint Forces Quarterly* (Autumn/Winter 2001-02): 93.

8. DA Pamphlet 600-3, *Commissioned Officer Development and Career Management*. NCOs use DA Pam 600-25, *U.S. Army Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development Guide*. Warrant Officers use DA Pam 600-11, *Warrant Officer Professional Development*.

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